

Gazette.Net

Maryland Community News

Published: Wednesday, September 7, 2011

Montgomery council should reject proposed youth curfew

Listening to County Executive Isiah Leggett, you would never guess that gang-related crime in Montgomery County decreased 50 percent from 2008 to 2010. To justify proposing a permanent youth curfew, the executive cites a serious but isolated gang fight that occurred July 1 in downtown Silver Spring, an incident that included both adults and youth.

The 50 percent decline in gang-related crime shows that current strategies are working. These include providing out-of-school activities to help young people stay out of trouble, using intervention specialists to help youth leave gangs, maintaining a comprehensive database of gang members, and assigning police and prosecutors to focus on gang-related crime. Law enforcement and correctional personnel, prosecutors, human service and recreation workers, and nonprofit providers deserve credit for excellent work.

Making it illegal for an entire group of people to be out in public during certain hours is unwarranted except during a public emergency, and the county executive already has the authority to order a general or limited curfew for up to three days without County Council approval. County Executive Isiah Leggett's permanent youth curfew would apply to people under 18 from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. Sunday to Thursday, and midnight to 5 a.m. on weekends.

Police officers have many tools to maintain order, including laws against harassment, public drunkenness, disturbing the peace and disorderly conduct. In communities where crime is a problem, such as downtown Silver Spring, the county has added police officers. The County Council recently approved 28 additional officers for the Third Police District, including 12 more for downtown Silver Spring. The county also should pursue federal grants to fund surveillance cameras in problem areas, as County Police Chief Tom Manger proposes, and continue to deploy the Police Community Action Team to bolster police presence where needed.

Proponents haven't presented any research documenting the effectiveness of permanent curfews. At the public hearing, Manger, testifying on behalf of the county executive, said, "Nobody is claiming that we think that this is going to reduce the crime rate." Indeed, why would gang members who commit crimes that carry jail sentences be deterred by a curfew that carries a \$100 fine?

In contrast, research examining youth curfews in other jurisdictions states, "Overall, the weight of the scientific evidence ... fails to support the argument that curfews reduce crime and criminal victimization." ("The Effectiveness of Juvenile Curfews at Crime Prevention" by Professor Kenneth Adams, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, May 2003). Enforcing the curfew would be problematic because the proposed bill specifies 10 exemptions, including running an errand for a parent. More troubling, police officials say they would enforce the curfew selectively because they know who the troublemakers are.

"It's the kids who come to hang out but never spend a dime at area businesses," wrote County Police Lt. Robert Carter ("A cop on curfews: How we spot the good kids." *Washington Post*, Aug. 7). However, enforcing the curfew selectively, and subjectively, as described in his column would unduly expose the county to costly lawsuits. Stopping groups from hanging out late at night in downtown Silver Spring and intimidating passersby is a localized problem appropriately addressed by increasing police presence.

The council should reject Leggett's proposal for a permanent youth curfew — a proposal which falsely signals that crime and youth in the County are out of control, when crime is actually down and the overwhelming majority of youth are law-abiding. The council will continue working with him and Chief Manger to employ reasonable and proven strategies to fighting crime.

Phil Andrews is chairman of the Montgomery County Council's Public Safety Committee.